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Sent: Fri 4/3/2015 11:56:06 AM
Subject: VI Incident News

Criminal probe launched in family poisoning case

3 Apr 2015

The Virgin Islands Daily News

By ALDETH LEWIN

The Environmental Protection Agency has confirmed that the chemical that poisoned a vacationing family on St. John last month was methyl bromide, and the U. S. Justice Department launched a criminal investigation into the incident, according to documents filed with the Securities and Exchange Commission.

"We haven't completed the quality assurance, but the preliminary results did confirm the presence of methyl bromide," EPA spokesman Elias Rodriguez said Thursday.

Methyl bromide is a gas used as a fumigated pesticide. However, its use is highly restricted because of its toxicity, and it is not supposed to be used in residential environments.

On March 20, a Delaware family was admitted to Schneider Hospital with symptoms of poisoning. Over the course of a few days, all four — Stephen Esmond; his wife, Theresa Devine; and their two teenage sons, Sean and Ryan — were airlifted to stateside hospitals for continued treatment.

The family had rented Villa Capri at Sirenusa Condominium Resort on St. John from March 14 through March 22.

The V.I. Department of Planning and Natural Resources and the Environmental Protection Agency have been investigating the incident.

According to the investigation, Terminix, one of the companies contracted by Sirenusa, improperly used a pesticide containing methyl bromide in a unit adjacent to the Esmond family's rental.

The EPA collected samples from the units last week, and DPNR has issued two stop use orders to Terminix, one for each district, to stop using any product containing methyl bromide and to quarantine any of the chemical that may be in the company's possession.

Rodriguez said Thursday that the EPA investigators are now ventilating the upper and lower unit in building J, where the Esmond family was staying.

“The idea is that we’ll ventilate for a period, then close it up and resample,” he said.

After those samples are tested, the results will be forwarded to the V.I. Health Department.

“They are the ones who would have to make the call on whether the units are cleared for occupancy,” Rodriguez said.

According to the EPA, air quality tests have indicated that venting the air inside the residential units to the outside can begin. The venting began Tuesday, Rodriguez said. EPA officials opened all the windows of the units and used exhaust fans to move the air around.

The ventilation is being done during the day when there are fewer residents in the area, and the areas will be marked off with yellow caution tape. Guests and residents of buildings K and I are urged not to occupy their units between the hours of 9 a.m. to 4 p.m.

Residents are also asked to keep their windows closed during the ventilation of building J.

Acting Health Commissioner Duane Howell has requested the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry and Center for Disease Control and Prevention conduct an epidemiologic investigation on the release of methyl bromide at the Sirenusa Condominium Resort.

Health will collaborate with the federal agencies to:

- Contact residents of the condo complex who stayed in any of the fumigated units either during or after the application of methyl bromide.
- Contact condo complex employees who may have worked in any fumigated units either during or after the application of methyl bromide.
- Contact emergency responders, law enforcement or other people who may have entered treated units.
- Provide information to the public and anyone who may have had exposure to the chemical about the symptoms of methyl bromide poisoning.
- Ensure anyone who may have been exposed gets medical care.

“If you frequent an area where gases, such as methyl bromide, may have been applied in a residential setting, please take caution and report any symptoms to a medical care provider immediately. Symptoms of poisoning vary widely. Soon after inhalation of large doses, symptoms may include headache, dizziness, nausea, chest and abdominal pain, and a dry throat,” Howell said.

The parent company of Terminix, ServiceMaster Global Holdings Inc., posted an 8-K filing with the Securities and Exchange Commission about the incident on Monday.

Form 8-K is a current report — as opposed to the regular quarterly and annual reports— companies must file with the SEC to announce major events that shareholders should know about.

In the filing, the company disclosed that on March 25, the U.S. Department of Justice initiated a criminal investigation into allegations that a local Terminix branch used methyl bromide at a resort on St. John.

“The extent of potential fines and other sanctions that the federal and local governmental authorities may impose, and the impact of any judicial, administrative or regulatory proceedings or other issues resulting from or related to the incident, including claims by third parties, investigation costs and reputational harm, is not currently known. The Company is in the process of investigating this matter and is fully cooperating with all relevant governmental authorities,” the ServiceMaster document said.

The VI Source

Plans in Works to Study Health Impacts of Methyl Bromide Use

By Lynda Lohr — April 2, 2015

The Health Department has plans in progress to do an epidemiologic investigation on the March incident at St. John’s Sirenusa condominiums, where a pesticide containing methyl bromide used to fumigate a room sickened four members of a vacationing Delaware family, the department said in a press release issued Thursday.

Members of the family suffered seizures while staying in the unit.

Health’s epidemiologist Dr. Esther Ellis said Thursday, “It’s an assessment to look back as to how many other people were affected.”

As of Monday, family attorney James Maron said that Stephen Esmond and sons Ryan and Sean remain in a stateside hospital in critical condition. The mother, Theresa Devine, is in a rehabilitation facility. A further update was not available Thursday.

The pesticide was sprayed by the St. Thomas-based Terminix on March 18 in a room at Sirenusa. The Esmonds got sick March 20.

This incident prompted the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and the V.I. Department of Planning and Natural Resources to launch an investigation into the matter.

Health has asked for assistance from the federal Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to conduct the study.

The study will include contacting residents of the condo complex who stayed in any of the fumigated units either during or after the application of methyl bromide. Condo complex employees who may have worked in any fumigated units, either during or after the application of methyl bromide, will also be contacted.

Additionally the study calls for contact with emergency responders, law enforcement or other people who may have entered treated units.

According to the press release, those groups will be provided with situational awareness of the potential symptoms that may have presented as a result of exposure to methyl bromide.

In questioning those potentially affected, the study will assess and record any reports on health effects consistent with methyl bromide exposure during the time periods during and after the fumigation activities. It will determine if they have received treatment from a physician for symptoms consistent with methyl bromide exposure or a documented health effect from an actual methyl bromide exposure.

If you frequent an area where gases, such as methyl bromide, may have been applied in a residential setting please take caution and report any symptoms to a medical care provider immediately.

Symptoms of poisoning vary widely. Soon after inhalation of large doses, symptoms may include headache, dizziness, nausea, chest and abdominal pain, and a dry throat.

Wikipedia defines epidemiology as the science that studies the patterns, causes and effects of health and disease conditions in defined populations. It is a cornerstone of public health and informs policy decisions and evidence-based practice by identifying risk factors for disease and targets for preventive health care.

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